

Vacancy in See Consultation

Summary report

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 People across the diocese were invited to share their hopes for the future, the challenges facing us, and the characteristics they would wish to see in a new diocesan bishop. Following four weeks of consultation and detailed analysis, we received 2,555 responses from adults, including 60 submitted on behalf of groups, and 148 responses to the under-18 questions.

1.2 After extensive analysis, ten key themes emerged as most frequently raised across all questions: some, issues for the next bishop to address, others, qualities they should offer:

- Courage and conviction
- Division and unity
- Faithfulness to the scriptures
- Growth through sharing the gospel
- Holiness and spirituality
- Inclusion
- Pastoral leadership and active listening
- Relevance of church to wider society
- Support for rural churches
- Theological and intellectual depth

1.3 The key consultation questions were open text, without prompts.

We asked adults:

- What are your hopes for the diocese, especially the churches in Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Buckinghamshire?
- What are the challenges facing the diocese?
- What particular three characteristics would you want in the person called to be our new bishop?
- Is there anything else you would like to share with us as we discern who God is calling?

We asked those aged under 18:

- What should our new bishop be like? Please use three words.
- What do you think will be the hardest thing our new bishop will have to do?
- What do you think the new bishop's first tasks might be? Please tell us up to three things
- What else would you like to tell us about your hopes for our new bishop?

1.4 Of those adults who completed the demographic questions: 87% attend church weekly 57% identified as female, 43% as male, fewer than 1% as non-binary 5% identified as part of the LGBTQIA+ community 17% said they had a disability or were neurodivergent 96% identified as being from a white ethnic background.

2. BACKGROUND

1.1 This report is written on behalf of, and owned by, the Vacancy in See (VinSee) Communications Group. All members contributed to the design of the questions asked, the classification used for responses, and some were part of the small group coding responses. Members reviewed the 11,000 text responses given and took an active part in reviewing this report.

1.2 The main purpose of the consultation was to find out from the people of Oxford Diocese their views for our new bishop after Bishop Steven retires in 2026. The report from the consultation is part of the Vacancy in See Committee's (VinSee) considerations.

1.3 This report is a mix of objective statistical analysis and qualitative analysis of open text responses to the consultation questions. With over 2,700 responses and hence 11,000 responses to the four questions, this report aims to reflect the wide ranging and deeply felt comments made.

1.4 People were asked to comment on their hopes for the diocese, the challenges that will be faced by our new bishop, and characteristics they would like to see in our new bishop. Those aged under 18 were asked a similar set of questions asking them to use three words to describe their new bishop, what will be the hardest thing the new bishop has to face, and what they think will be the new bishop's first task. This report gives a summary of the responses received.

1.5 Representativeness of responses. This analysis was based upon 2,703 responses to the consultation after data cleaning: there were 2,555 responses to the adult questions: 60 on behalf of a group, and 2,495 on behalf of themselves. There were 148 responses to the under 18 questions: 117 on behalf of themselves, 29 on behalf of a group and 2 left blank. Therefore, responses to the Under 18 questions were only 5% of the total responses. We do not know how many people were in each group providing joint responses, but the number of voices heard from the consultation is therefore higher than the total responses reported here.

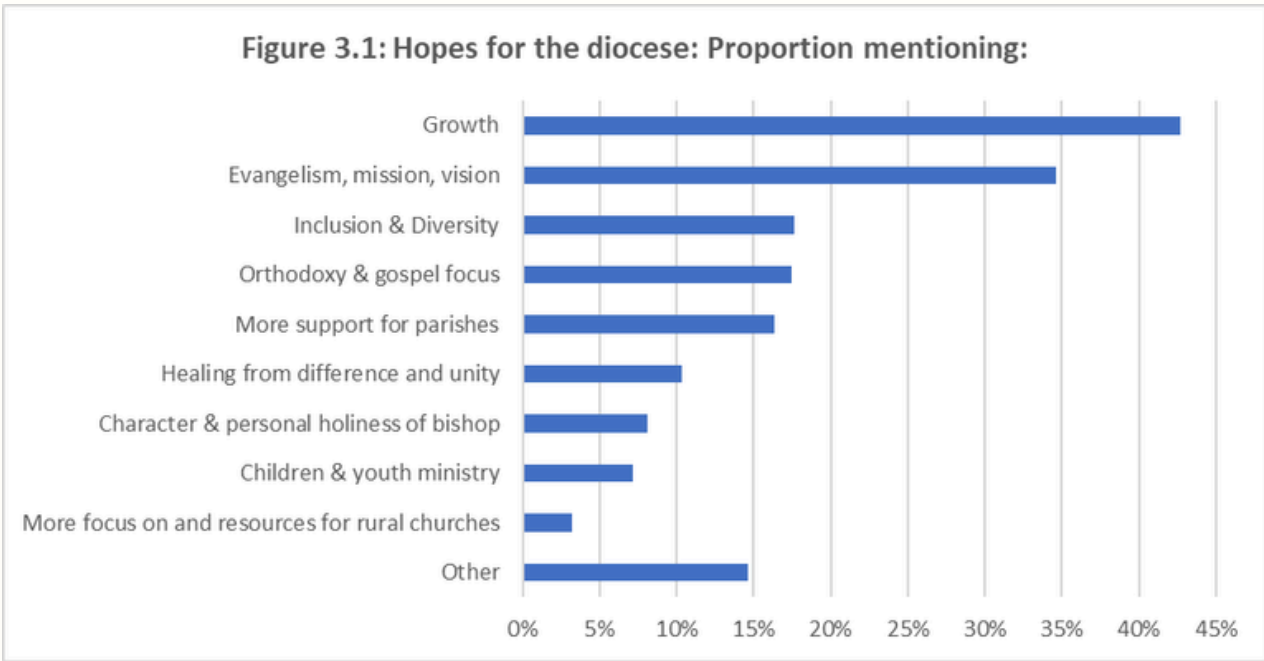
1.6 While we achieved an excellent number of responses, with so many voices represented, compared with national population averages, it is likely that voices from those from non-white ethnic groups and from those with a disability or who are neurodivergent are under-represented in our responses. There were proportionately more responses from Oxfordshire but a strong response across all the counties.

3. OUR FINDINGS: ADULTS

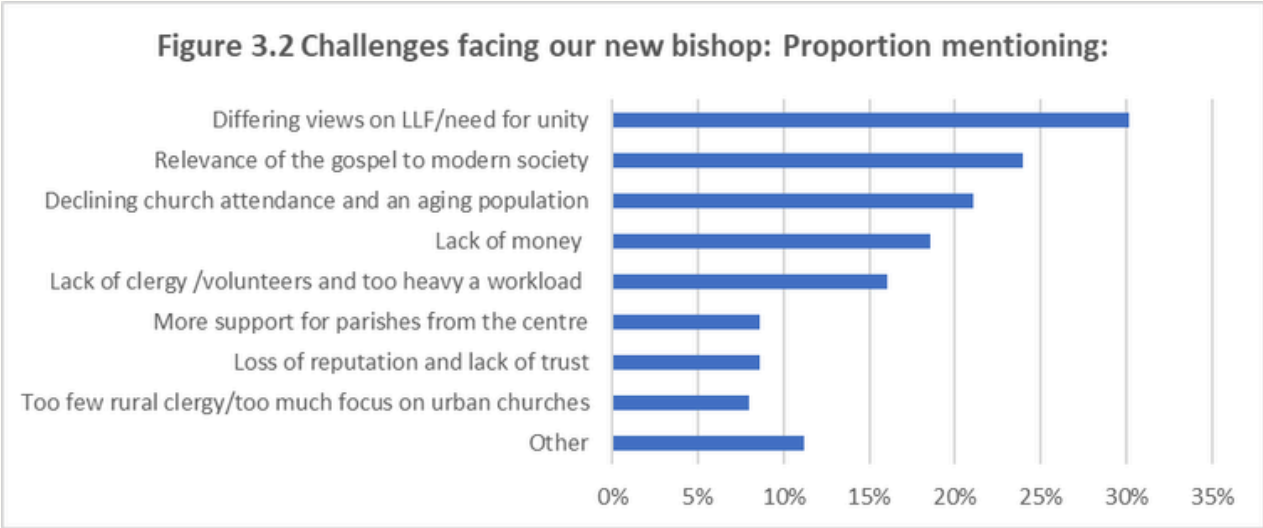
SUMMARY OF ADULT RESPONSES

3.1 Each question was analysed to identify the frequency with which each theme occurred in the responses. These are expressed in the figures below as the proportion of responses that mentioned these themes. Many people mentioned more than one subject in each response so the total number of responses for each question is more than the number of those responding. It may be of course that other people feel similarly about these issues but did not mention them in their responses. Those responding to the consultation were not asked to rank their opinions, and so the themes are not ranked either.

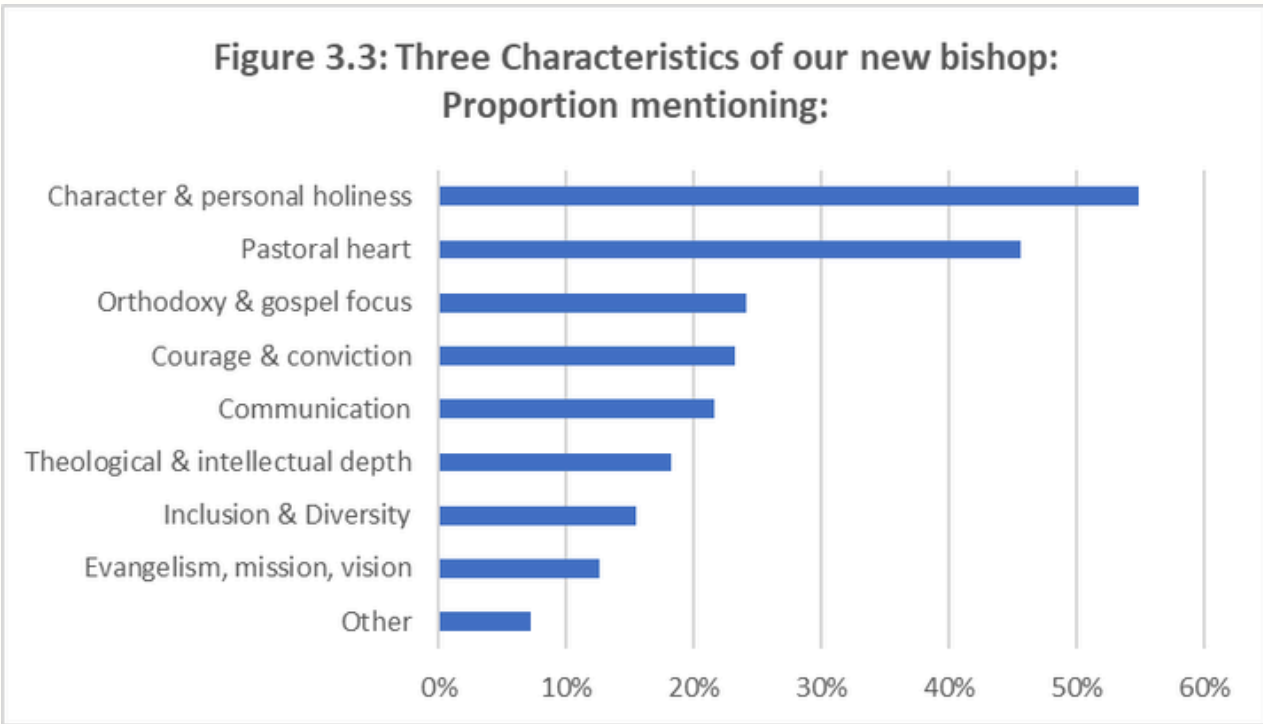
3.2 Figure 3.1 shows that almost one half of responses about their hopes for the diocese mentioned church growth (numerically and spiritually), and a further one third mentioned evangelism and community engagement, showing the desire for the church to be outward facing, sharing the gospel and serving their community.



3.3 Figure 3.2 shows that 30% of responses about challenges faced by the diocese mentioned deep division over Living in Love and Faith (LLF), sexuality, and theological disagreement. Almost one quarter of responses mentioned a loss of relevance for the church and difficulty in engaging with modern society. One fifth also mentioned declining attendance and aging congregations.



3.4 When asked about which particular three characteristics they would want in the person called to be our new bishop, as shown in Figure 3.3. over one half mentioned personal holiness, prayerful, humility, being servant hearted and similar. Almost one half wanted someone pastoral hearted, who is a pastor not a manager, cares for the clergy, has compassion, visits parishes and listens deeply.



A word cloud of terms related to pastoral ministry. The most prominent words are 'God', 'Jesus', 'faith', 'love', 'strong', 'leadership', 'ability', and 'teaching'. Other visible words include 'Christ', 'humility', 'understanding', 'gospel', 'inclusive', 'truth', 'skills', 'parish', 'biblical', 'wisdom', 'leader', 'prayer', 'God's', 'pastoral', 'courage', 'scripture', 'orthodox', 'compassionate', 'heart', 'experience', 'care', 'integrity', 'clergy', 'communicator', 'parishes', 'open', 'spirit', 'approachable', 'humble', 'listen', 'prayerful', 'compassion', 'man', 'willing', 'lead', 'word', 'bible', 'ministry', 'faithful', 'brave', 'courageous', 'humorous', 'kind', 'gentle', 'patient', 'compassion', 'kindness', 'gentleness', 'patience', 'self-control', 'peace', 'joy', 'kindness', 'gentleness', 'patience', 'self-control', 'peace', 'joy', 'kindness', 'gentleness', 'patience', 'self-control', 'peace', 'joy'. The words are arranged in a circular pattern, with some words appearing multiple times. The colors of the words are primarily shades of blue, green, and purple.

3.6 Finally, people were asked if there was anything else they wanted to tell us as the Committee discern who God is calling to be our next bishop. Some people used this section to reinforce what they had already said in other questions while others raised new topics. Figure 3.4 shows that over one quarter of responses gave further comments about inclusion and diversity, 16% offered suggestions for the committee when discerning who God is calling or prayers for those making the decision.

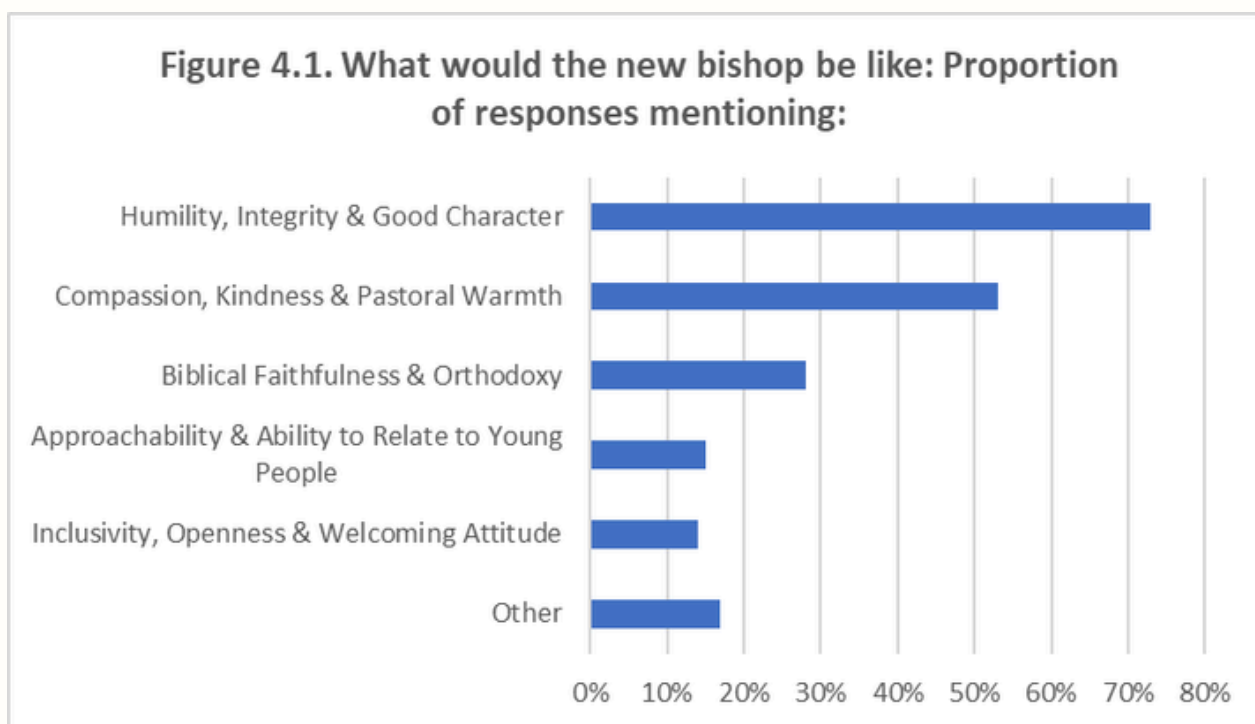


4. OUR FINDINGS: UNDER-18s

SUMMARY OF UNDER 18 RESPONSES

4.1 The figures below show the summary of responses from the under 18s. It should be remembered these represent a much smaller number of responses compared to those from adults – 148 responses from under 18s, representing 5% of the total responses. Therefore each 1% in these graphs represents just 1-2 people, compared to 1% representing 17-23 adult voices.

4.2 When asked what they wanted the new bishop to be like, as shown in Figure 4.1, three quarters mentioned showing humility, integrity and being of good character. Over one half mentioned compassion, kindness and pastoral warmth.

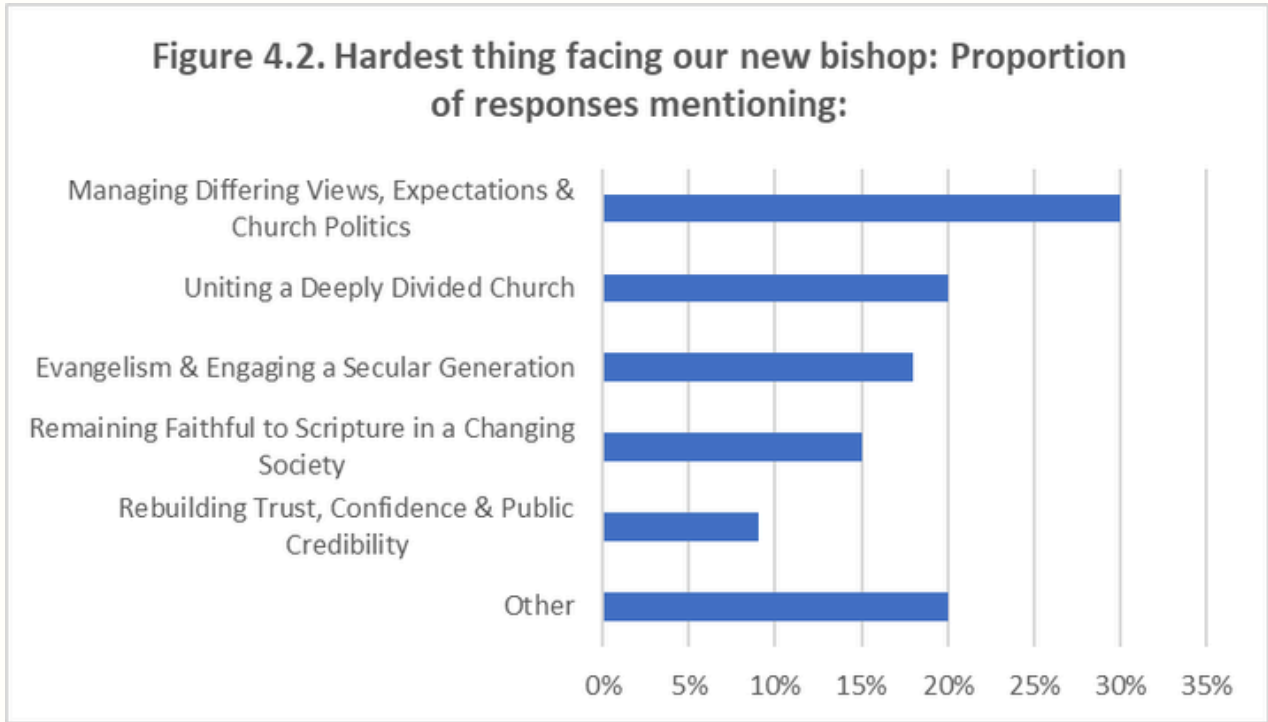


4.3 The word cloud below gives the words that occurred most frequently in the responses to the question on what they wanted the new bishop to be like. The most frequently mentioned words were 'kind', 'inclusive'. 'compassionate', 'humble', 'faithful', and 'prayerful', each with 10 or more mentions. These very much reflecting the coded themes seen in Figure 4.1.

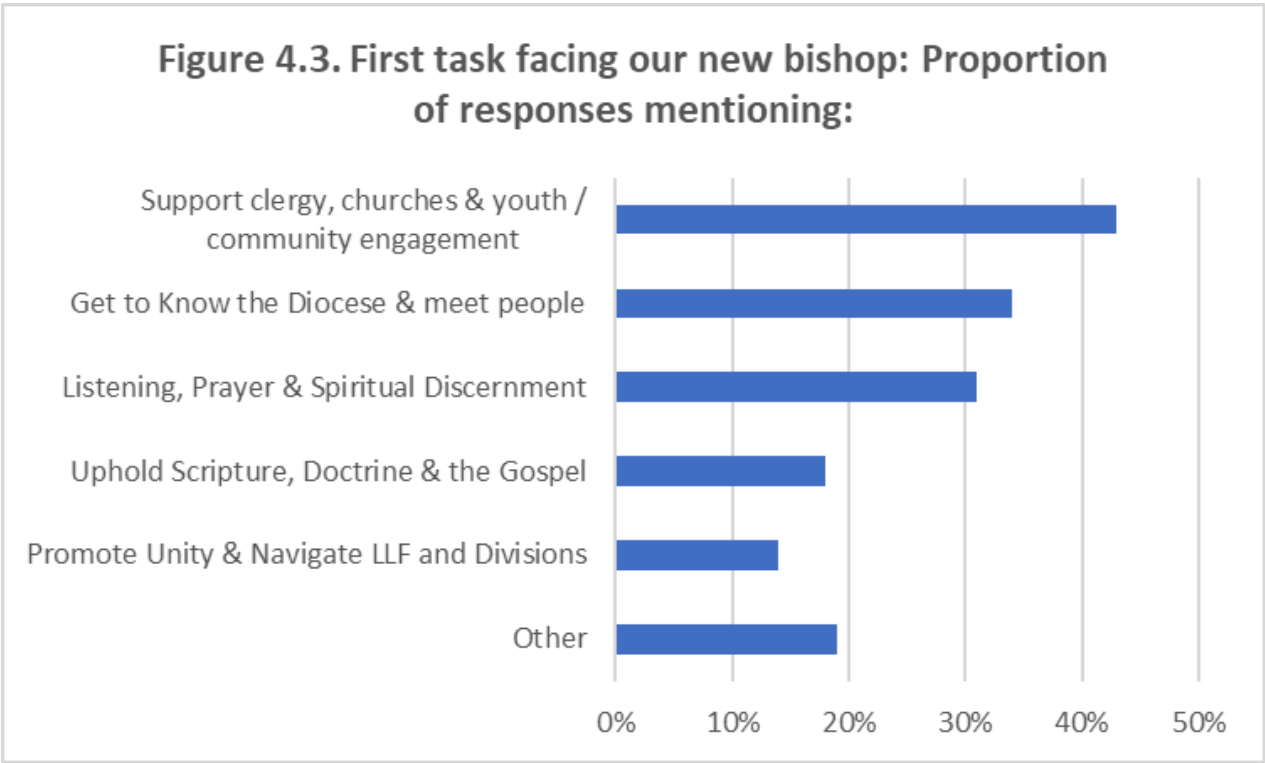


This word cloud shows the individual words that occur most frequently in the 148 responses from under-18s. Please note this is a much smaller sample size.

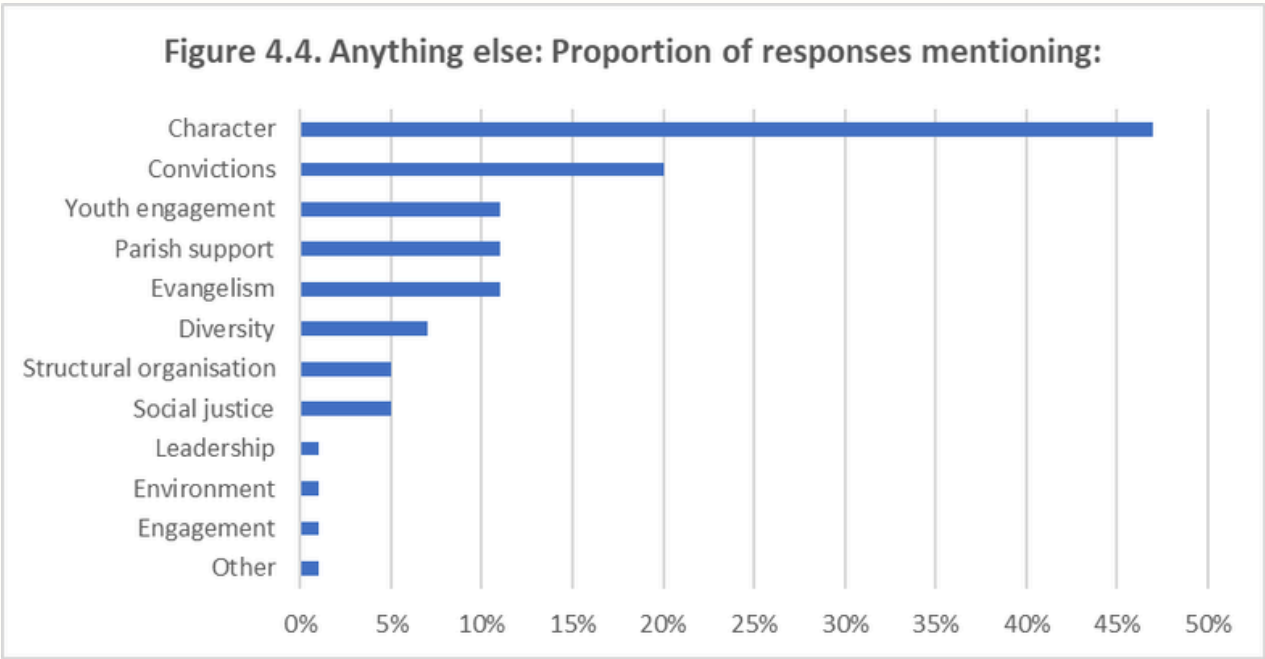
4.4 One third of responses, as shown in Figure 4.2, felt the hardest thing the new bishop will face will be managing differing views, expectations and church politics and one fifth of responses mentioned uniting a deeply divided church.



4.5 Figure 4.3 shows that over 40% of responses mentioned that the first task for the new bishop would be supporting clergy and churches, and engaging with youth and the community, and one third of responses mentioned getting to know the diocese and meeting people in churches and schools.



4.6 Various responses were given to the question asking if there was anything else they wanted to tell us, but, as shown in Figure 4.4, almost half of the responses mentioned the character of the new bishop.



4.7 These findings identified the emerging themes from the responses. Those which occurred most frequently, as given in Figures 3.1 to 4.4 above, are explored further in the following sections.

5. HOPES FOR OUR NEW BISHOP

5.1 HOLINESS AND SPIRITUALITY

Over one half of responses mentioned spiritual holiness using words such as kindness, humility, prayerfulness, and Christ-like character. Others mentioned being patient, tolerant and servant hearted. There were mentions of joy, being authentic and having an infectious love of God. Some responses quoted verses from the Bible, including Titus 1:7-9.

5.2 PASTORAL LEADERSHIP, VISIBILITY IN PARISHES, AND ACTIVE LISTENING

Almost one half of responses expressed a desire for a bishop to be pastoral-hearted, inspirational, working across the diocese, charismatic, who protects the local church and their clergy. Someone who has experience of parish ministry and has compassion for those in the diocese, and those who are hurting. Responses wanted the bishop to be visible and to visit and listen to everyone in the diocese.

5.3 COURAGE AND CONVICTION

Almost one quarter of responses mentioned wanting a bishop with courage and conviction in leadership. Typical comments included being strong and standing firm against cultural pressure, speaking the truth even when this makes them unpopular, clear leadership, especially through conflict and disagreement, being bold in decision making.

5.4 THEOLOGICAL AND INTELLECTUAL DEPTH

Almost one fifth of responses to the '3 characteristics' question mentioned theological and intellectual depth. There were many comments about needing a strong theological grounding and an ability to engage with academia. Many comments felt the new bishop would need to be wise with clear thinking, intellectual credibility and able to articulate clearly in complex contexts. They would need to be curious, insightful and contemplative.

5.5 DIVISION AND UNITY

Much division across the church, not only in our diocese, is a result of strongly held convictions concerning the recent LLF process and the deep concern over the new bishop's own views on these matters. Voices who wished for a bishop with orthodox Christian teaching and faithfulness to the gospel, together with those voices for inclusion and others for unity, are explored in more depth in Section 6.

5.6 OTHER HOPES IN OUR NEW BISHOP

These included a desire for growth of the church through evangelism (Section 9), and communication (Section 10.5).

6. CONVICTIONS ON MARRIAGE, SEX AND SEXUALITY

6.1 Much division across the church, not only in our diocese, is a result of strongly held convictions concerning the recent Living in Love and Faith (LLF) process and the deep concern over the new bishop's own views on these matters.

6.2 FAITHFULNESS TO THE SCRIPTURES

One quarter of responses emphasised a desire for a bishop who had confidence in the scriptures and biblical authority especially on doctrine, morals, and marriage. They wanted someone who was grounded in the Bible and unashamed of the gospel. Many of the responses to each of the questions raised issues of faithfulness to scripture, following the biblical teaching on doctrine, marriage and morals and adherence of the historic Christian faith. Their deep convictions were heard through their comments. Many quoted Bible passages to support their views.

6.3 INCLUSION

There were similarly high numbers of responses seeking a bishop who would support the LGBTQIA+ community through stand-alone blessings for Prayers of Love and Faith and allow same-sex clergy to be married in church. The new bishop should not only ordain women but actively promote and encourage women's ministry and leadership at all levels across the diocese. There were comments related to support for different ethnic groups (despite being under-represented in the responses) and people of disability, who are often marginalised.

6.4 DIVISION AND UNITY

Many comments related to unhappiness at the division caused by such opposing and deep-felt convictions over differences in theology. The desire for unity and healing was expressed by over 10% of those responding, expressed in a variety of ways, for example some hoping for a bishop who could bring together our churches, not in agreement but in respectful disagreement and shared mission, others expressing it in terms of greater unity in Christ.

7. SUPPORT FOR RURAL CHURCHES

7.1 Throughout the responses there were many heartfelt comments about the rural churches feeling that they were not valued, were abandoned, and that scarce resources were being channelled towards urban large churches. There was anxiety that the rural churches were under threat, and that the creation of large multi-parish benefices was causing impossible workloads for the clergy and (often older) volunteers struggling to keep their churches viable. There were also comments about new housing developments often being in rural areas and needing resources to help reach out to these new communities. There was some recognition too of urban churches often struggling to find volunteers and finances to maintain their historic buildings.

8. THE RELEVANCE OF CHURCH TO WIDER SOCIETY

8.1 Many comments were made about the church being out of touch with modern society, being perceived as irrelevant with a disconnect between church life and modern culture. However, many of the comments wanted to reconnect with local communities through worship, outreach and communication. Responses from the consultation reflected that many people in our diocese have no experience of church going or engaging with the church.

9. GROWTH THROUGH SHARING THE GOSPEL

9.1 Many responses recognised the need for a bishop to lead the diocese in evangelism and growth. This was felt to come from both actively sharing the gospel and from serving our local communities in meaningful ways. Comments related to training clergy to lead in growth and evangelism, but also in giving congregations confidence to speak out in their communities.

10. OTHER ISSUES

Other themes raised by those responding to the consultation related to children, young people and families, safeguarding and trust, resources (people and money), and diocesan structure and resources. Prayers were also offered for the discernment process.

10.1 CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Maybe surprisingly, given the diocesan priority of children and young people, this area did not feature highly in responses to any of the questions, although the under 18s responses frequently mentioned the new bishop engaging with schools and young people. Nevertheless, comments were made with the hope that the number of children and young people in our churches would grow, and that with this comes the need for investment in youth ministry and resources.

10.2 SAFEGUARDING AND TRUST

Safeguarding and rebuilding trust in the church was seen as a major concern from many responses. People wanted there to be open and accountable processes for safeguarding at the heart of all we do. They want all our churches to be welcoming places of safety.

10.3 RESOURCES (MONEY AND PEOPLE)

Throughout all the responses were comments about the lack of resources in our churches, especially with falling numbers in our congregations, and the increasing overheads to maintain our buildings. It was recognised that our buildings need to be warm and welcoming to attract more people to join our congregations, and that smaller congregations need to work hard just to meet their financial commitments leaving no time for evangelism and growing their church.

10.4 SOCIAL JUSTICE

Social justice and social action were recurring themes through the responses, recognising that the church has an important role in serving our disadvantaged local communities. Also, people noted our role in promoting environmental issues and reducing our carbon footprint.

10.5 COMMUNICATION AND ENGAGEMENT SKILLS

Comments were made about the need for the new bishop to be a good communicator both in their preaching and when engaging with parishes. They wanted to bishop to speak out for those without a voice – the poor and the marginalised. Many recognised the role the bishop will play in the House of Lords and in media, so needed to be able to communicate the Christian message clearly in politics and the wider public square.

10.6 DIOCESAN STRUCTURES AND RESOURCING

Throughout the responses some comments were made about the diocesan structures and staffing level and wanting resources to be moved away from the diocesan offices into the parishes.

10.7 OFFERS OF PRAYER AND COMMENTS ON THE SELECTION PROCESS

Many of those responded recognised the importance of the task facing those discerning who should be our new bishop. Suggestions were made about the process, and things to consider during the discernment process. Finally, many of those responding offered their prayers for those with the responsibility of discerning who God is calling to be our next bishop.

11. RESPONSES

11.1 The consultation was open from 7 January to 4 February 2026.

11.2 People were asked if they were aged under 18 or if the majority of their group was aged under 18. If so, they were routed to a slightly different but linked set of four questions. Those aged under 18 and those responding on behalf of a group were not asked the demographic questions.

11.3 Links to the online survey were shared through the diocesan eNews, a mailing to clergy, on social media and encouragement issues from various Diocesan staff to key groups who we wanted to ensure were properly represented. A copy of the questions was available to download for those unable or unhappy to use the online survey. Eight people emailed their responses to a dedicated email address in the diocese, and these were entered into the survey for them.

11.4 When the consultation closed, we had received 2,745 responses; 2,641 said were replying for themselves, 121 of whom said they were under 18. 89 people said they were replying on behalf of a group, 33 of these groups the majority were aged under 18. 15 did not answer this question although a subsequent response showed they were answering on behalf of a group.

12. DATA CLEANING

12.1 Spelling mistakes inevitably creep in when people are writing. As one of the outputs would be a word cloud from the questions asked to adults of three characteristics and for under 18s of three words to describe the new bishop, it was important to check the spelling to ensure words were spelled correctly so grouped with the same words given by others. In some cases where a word was spelled incorrectly, this required a full reading of the response to ensure the intended word was given.

12.2 There was a possibility that people with strongly held views might wish to make multiple responses to increase the weight of their views. As we provided a generic invitation, it was not possible to limit the number of responses for each email address. Therefore, any potential duplicates could only be identified using the network id provided in the download of all responses. This gave 184 networks from which there was more than one response. Of course, more than one person may use the same network – for example, those in the same family, those completing their responses at a church, and 30 used the Church House Oxford network, so in itself this did not prove duplication. The next stage was to take all those using the same network and check for duplicated answers. 3 records were duplicated with the same responses and same demographic information, so one of each pair was removed.

12.3 There were also responses from the same network where one response was blank and one completed. It is likely that some people read through the consultation questions online to see what was being asked and then came back later to give considered responses. This would result in one response with blank responses to the four questions and one with completed responses. As a result, 31 blank records were deleted.

12.4 A few responses told us that their church was providing suggested responses to their congregation. They were concerned that this could skew the responses to the survey. As a result, we did look for duplicated answers but while there were several responses with similar responses, only those identified in 12.2 above were identical. We therefore had to assume that even if people had been given suggested responses that they responded according to their conscience.

12.5 After data cleaning there were 2,555 responses to the adult questions: 60 on behalf of a group, and 2,495 on behalf of themselves. There were 148 responses to the under 18 questions: 117 on behalf of themselves, 29 on behalf of a group and 2 left blank. We do not know how many people were in each group providing joint responses, but the number of voices heard from the consultation is therefore higher than the total responses reported here.

13. THEMATIC CLASSIFICATION

13.1 The consultation asked people four open text questions about their hopes for the diocese, challenges faced by the diocese, three characteristics they hoped for in our new bishop and anything else they wanted the selection committee to consider. The questions for the under 18s were similar, asking about what our new bishop should be like in three words, what will be the hardest thing the new bishop has to do, what did they think the new bishop's first tasks might be, and anything else they wanted to tell us about their hopes for the new bishop.

13.2 All these questions were open text with no prompting, so a good way to hear the issues currently exercising those in our congregations. Nevertheless, as we did not focus on specific areas, we cannot say that 'x proportion' of responders were concerned about a specific issue, as we did not ask everyone about that issue. What we can say with confidence are the issues of concern to the largest numbers of those responding have been identified and reported on in this report.

13.3 We derived the classification by reading through all the responses and creating a list of emerging themes; two members of the communications sub-group by eye supported using AI as a further check– the lists were very consistent across both approaches. These themes were used as a coding frame. The aim for each question was to have a coding frame of five to seven themes with an 'other' category with not more than 10% of responses being coded to 'other'.

13.4 After coding, 15% of the 'hopes' question were coded to other, 11% of the 'challenges' question, 7% of the 'characteristics of the new bishop' question and 5% of the 'anything else' question. A higher proportion of the under 18 responses were coded to 'other' - 17% of the 'what should the new bishop be like' question where there were no clear themes from these responses, 20% of the 'hardest thing' question and 19% of the 'first task' question, where several comments in both questions mentioned safeguarding and social justice, and 1% of the 'anything else' question.

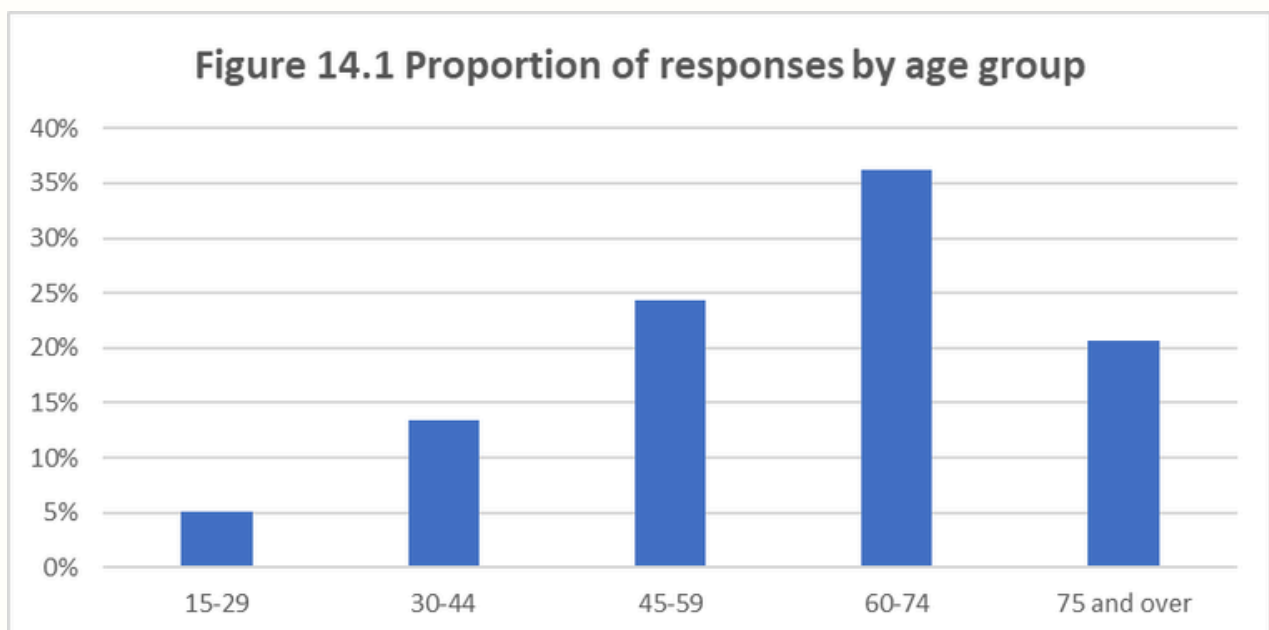
13.5 Each complete set of responses to a question was coded by one person and reviewed by another. The original coder then reviewed the reviewer's comments, making changes where they agreed. During the coding phase some small amendments were made to the coding schedule to include other characteristics or examples to ensure coding was as consistent as possible.

14. DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

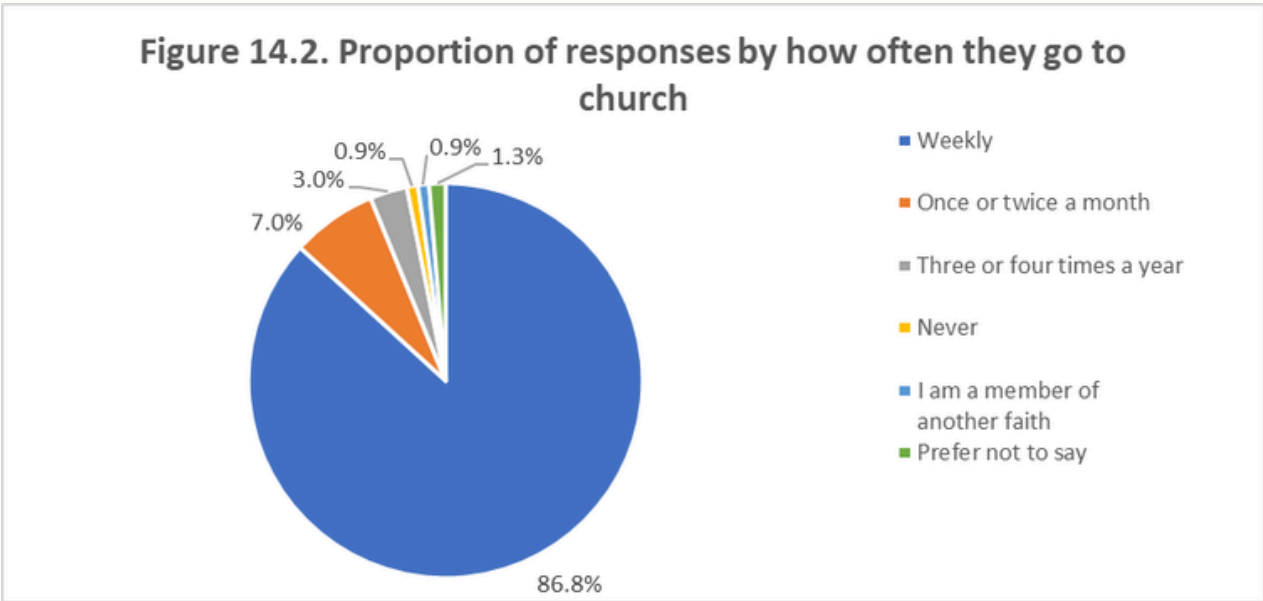
14.1 The Vacancy in See Committee wanted to hear from representative voices across all demographic groups. Therefore, demographic information was requested from those responding and was used throughout the consultation period to check whether any groups within the diocese were underrepresented in the responses to date. Regularly while the consultation was open, the demographic information was reviewed and if people from specific demographic were under-represented in the responses to date, then there were discussions with the appropriate diocesan advisor and bishops to send reminders to these groups through their established networks.

14.2 Demographic questions were asked only of adults answering for themselves. They were asked about age, gender, ethnicity, where they lived, disability and neurodiversity, whether they attended church and if so, how often. People were also asked how they heard about the consultation. It was important to hear voices from across the whole diocese, town, city and village, all ages, genders and ethnic groups, whether living with a disability or not. The graphs that follow show the proportion of responses by each characteristic. In these graphs each 1% represents 17-23 voices.

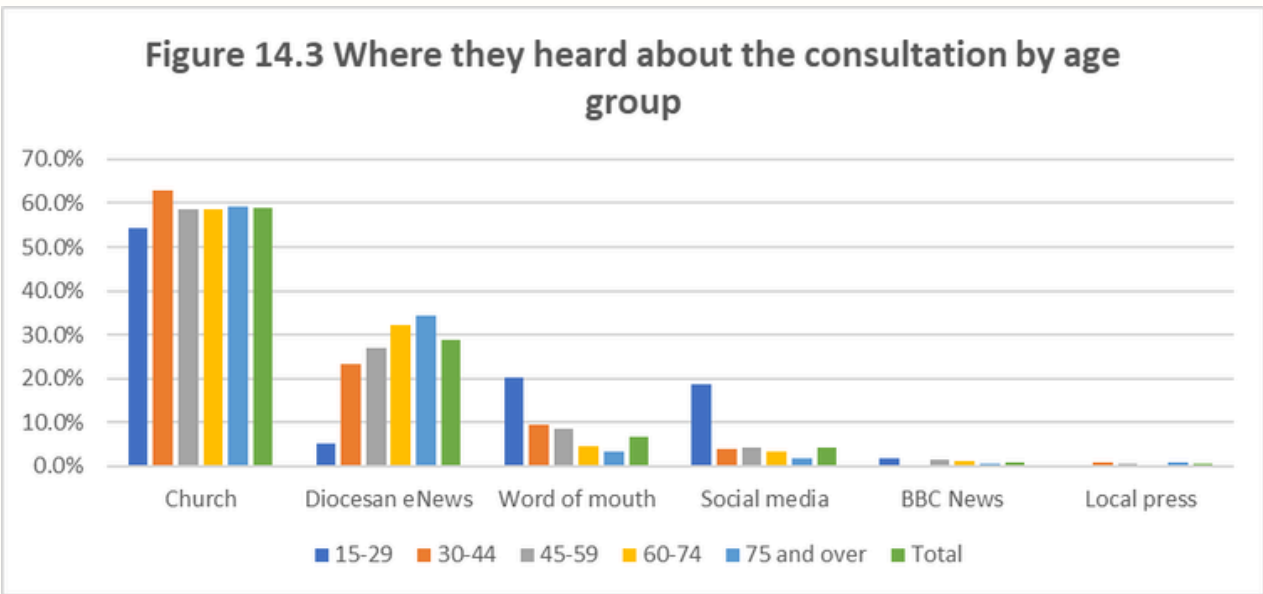
14.3 We know from our worshipping community figures that our diocese congregations are on average older than the population of those living in our diocese. Our responses by age group, as shown in Figure 14.1 below shows that one third of our responses were from those aged 60-74, one fifth from those aged 75 and over, and one quarter from those aged 45-59. We cannot compare directly with the worshipping community figures as that measure uses different age group classification. However, we know that in 2024 just over one third of our worshipping community was aged 70 and over. That is not out of line with the proportions of our responses from those aged 60-74 and those aged 75 and over.



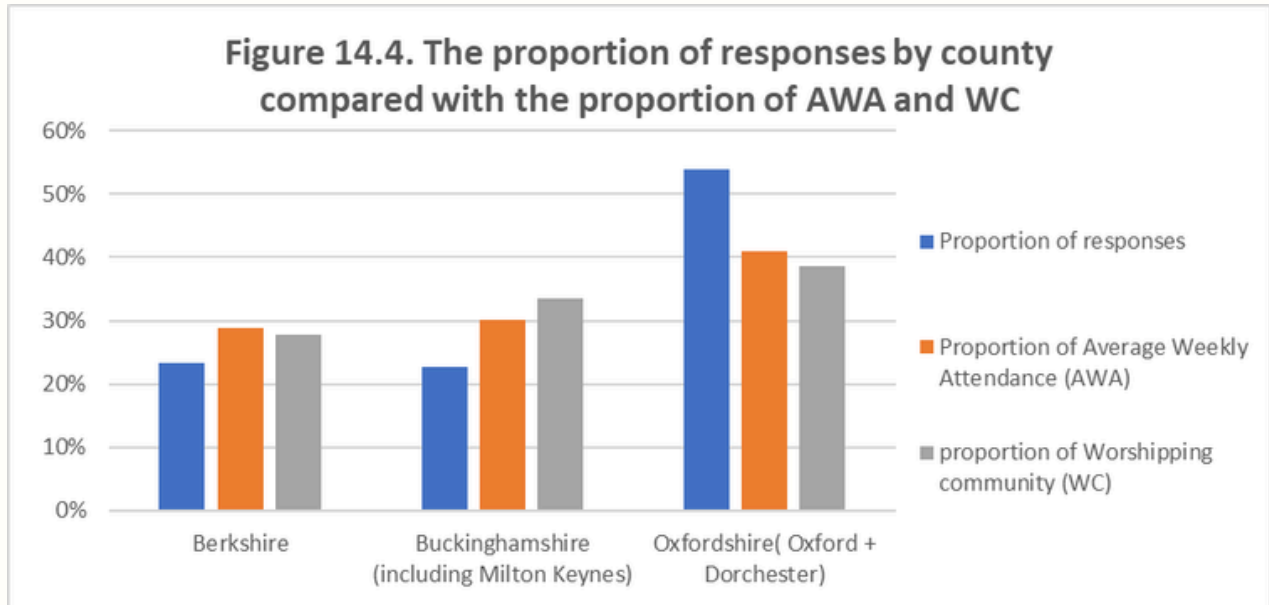
14.4 Figure 14.2 shows the proportion of responses by how often they attend church. The majority of responses (87%) said they attend church weekly, with a further 7% attending once or twice a month.



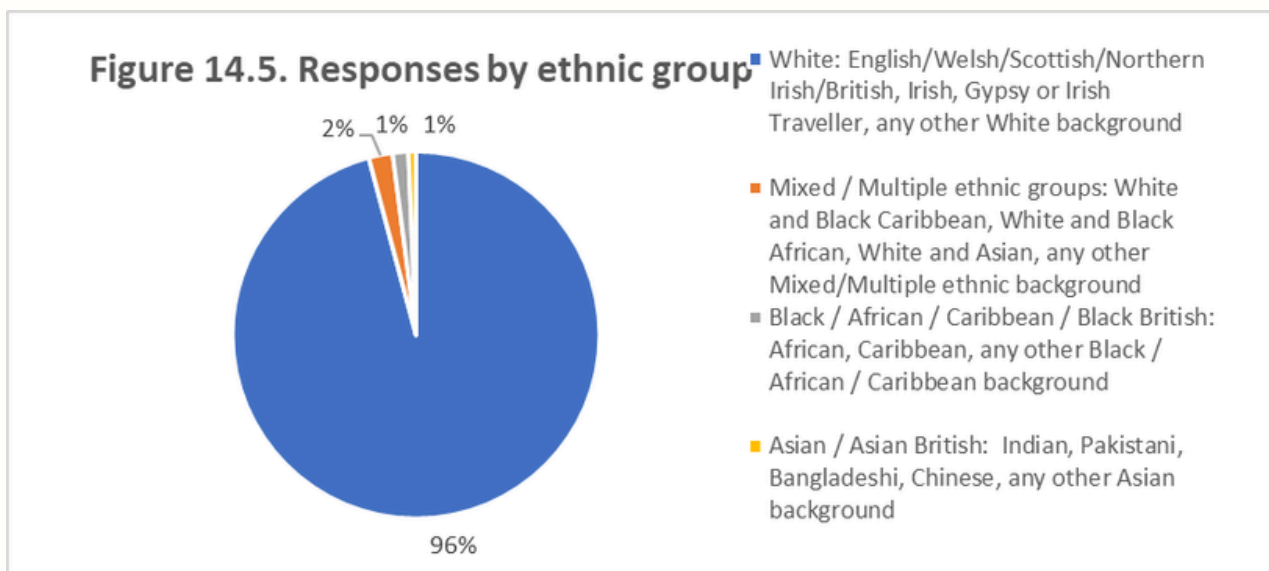
14.5 We asked where people had heard about the consultation. Given that 94% of responses said they attended church once a month or more (our definition of belonging to a church’s worshipping community), it is not surprising that, as shown in Figure 14.3 below, almost 60% of those responding heard about the consultation from church. This proportion was only slightly lower for those aged 15-29. Almost 30% heard about the consultation from the diocesan eNews weekly newsletter, but this varied by age group, with just 5% of those aged 15-29 hearing about the consultation this way. Those aged 15-29 were the largest group of those hearing by word of mouth (20%) and by social media (20%).



14.6 As such a high proportion of our response are from those who attend church at least once a month, it is appropriate to compare the proportion of our responses with similar proportions of attendance measures in our churches; our worshipping community (WC) and average weekly attendance (AWA). Figure 14.4 shows the proportion of responses by county compared with the 2024 proportion of our diocesan worshipping community and the proportion of the diocesan average weekly attendance in each county. The archdeaconries of Oxford and Dorchester have been added together to reach an Oxfordshire total. This shows that while the consultation did reach all three counties, there were proportionately more responses from Oxfordshire and correspondingly fewer from Berkshire and Buckinghamshire.



14.7 At the 2021 Census approximately 13.5% of the Christian population in England identified as being from a non-white ethnic group. We do know however, that many people from non-white ethnic groups belong to other denominations than the Church of England. Figure 14.5 shows the ethnicity of those responding to the consultation. 96% said they were of a white ethnic group, with 2% from a mixed or multiple ethnic group and 1% from each of the Black/ African/ Caribbean/ Black British and the Asian/ Asian British groups. Each 1% represents on average 17 voices. Therefore, it is likely that those from non-white ethnic groups are under-represented in our responses.



14.8 According to the 2021 Census the prevalence of disability increased significantly with age, with approximately 21% of people aged 50-64 and 33% of people aged 65 and over identifying as disabled. It is estimated that 15% of the population are neurodivergent, but this varies by age with higher rates of diagnosis in children and young adults compared to adults. From those responding to the consultation who answered this question, 17% said they had a disability or were neurodivergent. So, it is likely that our responses underrepresent those with disabilities or who are neurodivergent.

14.9 Among our responses, for those that stated a gender, 57% said they were female, 43% male and fewer than 1% said they were non-binary. Based on the 2021 Census of England and Wales, which was the first to ask voluntary questions on sexual orientation and gender identity for those aged 16 and over, 3.2% of the population identified with an LGB+ orientation. In our consultation 5% identified as part of the LGBTQIA+ community.

14.10 In summary, therefore, while we achieved an excellent number of responses, so all voices are represented, it is likely that voices from those from non-white ethnic groups and from those with a disability or who are neurodivergent are under-represented. There were proportionately more responses from Oxfordshire but given the high numbers from each county this is unlikely to have had any major effect on the voices heard.



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